

Tin Lizzie was a four-seater, but with help of running boards could accommodate at least eight more like this Michigan group.

WHEN EVERY CAR WAS A FORD

By Beth Hayes

Back on the farm when I was a kid, a car was a Ford. We never thought in terms of any other vehicle, and we never called it a Model T, either. That reference came later, when Nate Boone, Pittsville's rich banker, began driving the latest Model A. Only then did we find out all Fords were not Model T's. It came as pretty much of a shock to us, but we were always eager to keep up with the times, so we began immediately to refer to cars by their respective Ford model numbers.

The Model T with its erect black body, high fenders and thin tires carried us over country lanes and through pastures almost as easily as down the county highway. It was great for getting out of mud-holes, too, and we encountered plenty of them driving our long lane to the county road. The last half mile was solid clay. Dad called it gumbo and worried about getting stuck there any time it rained.

Since our school did not have a bus system, Dad drove us children five miles to and from school daily. On rainy days he would take a fast run at gumbo hill. Sometimes, when we'd had several rains and the lane was thoroughly soaked, he'd let down the barbed-wire fence and cut across the pasture.

Everyone around Pittsville marveled at Dad's driving skill. Yet there were times when we did get stuck, and when that happened he got pretty upset: Getting stuck

meant he would have to hike home, hitch a team of horses to a double tree, then make the long trip back. Fastening them to the front end of the car was no picnic either. He usually hooked the log chain to the front axle and the team would pull for dear life.

Ab Mapes had pulled the axle right off the front of his car once, and Dad was always afraid that might happen to ours—but by the time he had walked home and back with two plodding work horses he was so irritated he didn't care whether he pulled the car apart or not. He would strap the horses hard to keep them pulling.

Fortunately for us, *our* Ford held together.

Starting the car required a special knack, too. Dad would set the spark on the steering wheel and lift the hood to regulate the choke before he started cranking. Sometimes the car kicked and he would come back to the driver's seat rubbing his shoulder and grumbling about his injured arm.

The car had a tendency to ease forward against him once the engine started, and Dad would lean hard against it trying to hold it back. Then he would run around the car and leap under the steering wheel before it edged too far forward. He said when you got ready to crank a car it was important to head it in the right direction because any car was bound to move a little.

Besides the problems of mud-holes and cranking, there was that of maintenance. This was minimal, actually, because Fords were made to run without coddling. Still, most farmers took care of repairs themselves. When transmission bands wore out, Dad replaced them with threshing-machine belting.

And because the car would run on the cheapest of fuel, in a pinch you could always steal a little kerosene from the oil stove. Our neighbor, Jake Berg, used to rob his wife Minnie's stove so often that they kept up a running battle as to who would get the fuel.

Jake couldn't understand why Minnie was so selfish with her kerosene when she had a perfectly good wood-burning range and a creek that washed up plenty of driftwood. Minnie said any man who was too stingy to buy gasoline deserved to ride the buggy. Besides, she insisted, if he used better gas he wouldn't always be working on the cylinder head. Then one day Jake bought a Model A. Since naturally he didn't want to risk cheap kerosene in its fine engine, Jake and Minnie were left without their source of conflict.

Pretty soon most of the farmers were getting Model A's; Model T's became outdated, and anyone who still drove one was pretty much of a hick. But there was a time back in Pittsville when anybody would have been proud to say he owned one. □



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